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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to measure the ability of very young children (ages 3 and 4) to use intention in making moral judgments. A total of 22 nursery school children, 11 males and 11 females, successfully completed the experiment; additionally, 39 high school students participated. Judgments of the "goodness" of story characters were made by the nursery school children. Stories were especially designed to explicitly state the character's motives; in each, the motive of the principal actor was either positive or negative and the consequences of the behaviors produced were either positive or negative. In this way, four combinations of intention and consequences were obtained for each of four motives: obedience, lying, stealing, and irascibility. Each child was presented with 16 stories in two sessions spaced 1 day apart. High school students performed the same task with age-appropriate materials. Comparisons were also made between responses to these newly constructed stories and responses to stories used by Piaget (1932). Results showed that: (1) young children exhibited intentionality in making judgments, (2) no statistical differences existed between judgments of older and younger subjects, and (3) young children gave greater weight to negative consequences in their judgments than did high school students. (RH)

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Judgment of Intentionality by Nursery School Children

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Running head: Judgment of Intentionality by Children

Abstract

Judgments of the "goodness" of story-characters, using combinations of positive and negative intentions and consequences were made by 22 nursery school children; their judgments were compared to a group of 29 high school students. The stories included the motives of obedience, lying, stealing, and irascibility. Results showed that young children use intentionality in making their judgments, and no statistical significant differences were obtained between their judgments and high school students. However, young children gave greater weight to negative consequence in their judgment than the high school subjects; some reasons were offered for the effects of consequence on children's judgments.

Judgment of Intentionality by Nursery School Children

The concept of intentionality deals with whether an action is motivated or accidental. The ability to understand and use this concept is of central importance in the making of moral judgments. Piaget (1932) established a paradigm which has been widely copied and modified by researcher in this area. He presented children with pairs of stories, one involving a child who produced a large amount of material damage without meaning to, and the other, a child who had bad intentions but produced little damage. Piaget reported that children close to the age of six judged the story character who caused the most damage as naughtier, even though his intentions were better; their judgments were influenced by the objective outcome. Older children, on the other hand, were making judgments based on intention. Piaget did not assert that younger children (under 9) make their judgments solely on the basis of outcome and are insensitive to intent, but they either focus on outcome or on intent and were not able to integrate both pieces of information in their judgments. A number of studies using Piaget's paradigm have supported his general findings (Bandura & McDonald, 1963; Boehm, 1962; Johnson, 1962; MacRae, 1954). Additional studies have been conducted on some of the methodological and conceptual issues involved in Piaget's procedure. Such problems as the ambiguity of the motives attributed to the characters in Piaget's original stories (Armsby, 1971), types and number of stories (Berg-Cross, 1975), and strategies used by young children in processing the information (Anderson, 1980; Austin, Ruble & Trabasso, 1977; Foellinger & Trabasso, 1977; Gottlieb, Taylor, & Ruderman, 1977; Gutkin, 1972; Hebble, 1971; Leon, 1980; Nunmedal & Bass, 1976).

The purpose of the present study was to measure the ability of very young children (ages 3-4) to use intention in making moral judgments. In this study, new stories were constructed so that the story character's motives were explicitly stated; the motives portrayed in these stories were either lying, stealing, obedience, or irascibility. These motives were selected since it was expected that young children would have had some experiences with these types of behaviors. For two of the motives, lying and stealing, stories from Piaget's study were used; this allowed a comparison of the judgments of the children to the stories in this experiment with those of Piaget. In addition, the same stories were presented to a group of high school students so that a comparison of judgments could be made with the nursery school children.

Method

Subject

A total of 25 nursery school children, 13 males and 12 females, volunteered to participate in the experiment. Of the total, 22 children, 11 males and 11 females, successfully completed the experiment. The ages of the subjects ranged from 3 years, 3 months to 5 years, 0 months.

A total of 39 high school students participated in the study; these students were enrolled in the Virginia Governor's School for the Gifted for the summer 1981, and were in two sections of the author's course on psychophysiology.

Stories

Twenty-eight stories, 4 practice and 24 experimental, were recorded on audio cassette tapes. Girl names were used for the story-characters for the female nursery school subjects, and boys for the male subjects. In each story, the motive of the principal actor was either positive or negative and the

consequences of the behaviors produced were either positive or negative. In this way four combinations of intention and consequence were obtained for each motive. Some examples of the stories and the motives used follows:

1. Obedience - positive intention, positive consequence

Debbie's mother asked her to help bake a cake for a party. Debbie said ok and did everything her mother told her to do. The cake turned out very well and everyone at the party liked it.

2. Irascibility - positive intention, negative consequence

Linda had a box of cookies. She wanted to share them with her friends so she dumped them out on the rug in order to divide them up. Just then her father came in and said, "You've made a big mess Linda. Go to your room right away!"

3. Lying - negative intention, positive consequence

Donald's mother asked him if he had worn his mittens out in the snow. Donald said yes even though he had not worn them. His mother was very pleased and gave him a cup of cocoa.

4. Stealing - negative intention, negative consequence

Mike liked his friend's truck very much. He wanted a truck too, but his parents would not buy him one. One day when his friend wasn't around, Mike took the truck and hid it in his room. His mother found it and got very angry. She spanked him and made him give it back.

Procedure

Nursery school subjects were tested individually in a quiet room separate from their activity rooms. Judgments of the "goodness" or "badness" of the story characters were obtained by having the children rate the behaviors of the story characters on a specially devised board 35 inches long and 5 inches wide

(88.9 x 12.7 cm). This board was painted white and divided into seven 5 inch (12.7 cm) sections by black stripes. The children were instructed how to use this scale by showing them three female (male) dolls of the same size as anchors. One of the dolls was described as "very good," characterized as being helpful, obedient, truthful, and honest; the second doll was placed at the other end of the board and was called the "very bad" doll, characterized as being unhelpful, disobedient, dishonest, and a liar; the third doll was referred to as "neither good nor bad," and was placed in the center of the board; these three dolls served as anchors for the scale. The children were then told to take a fourth similar doll, and after listening to the story on the tape recorder, place this doll on the appropriate space between the "good" and "bad" dolls. In this way subjects were using a 7-point scale for moral judgments. Each child was presented 16 stories, 4 practice and 12 experimental stories in two sessions, spaced 1 day apart.

The high school students were administered instructions about the experiment and the use of a 7-point rating scale in their classroom. All students were told to listen to each story, and rate the principal actor on the sheets furnish them. In this way, 19 of the students rated the stories with girls as the principal actors, and 20 students rated boys as the principal actors.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of judgments made to the stories in this experiment showed no statistical differences between the sex of the subjects. This being the case, responses of subjects were pooled for all statistical analyses of the data. These analyses revealed no significant differences in judgments by nursery school and high school subjects; providing evidence that the nursery school

subjects were able to use the 7-point scale in a manner similar to the older subjects.

Since the nursery school children were given two sessions to make their judgments, and the same four practice stories were administered at the beginning of each session, a measure of consistency in responding to these stories was obtained by comparing their responses for both sessions. A 2 (sex) X 2 (sessions) X 4 (stories) analysis of variance for repeated measures showed no significance in responding across sessions or for sex. This suggests that the responses given to these stories were similar and that the children were using the scale in the same manner for both sessions.

The primary hypothesis of this experiment was that very young children would be able to use intention in making moral judgments. It was also predicted that because the stories were designed to clearly differentiate positive and negative intentions, children would be able to use the information, and show evidence of subjective responsibility. These predictions were supported by the results of this study; see Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Insert Figures 1, 2 and 3 about here

Inspection of these figures shows, in each case, that positive intentions was judged higher than negative intentions, and that consequences of the behaviors were also considered by the subjects in making their judgments; playing a greater role in the judgments of nursery school subjects than in the high school subjects. Mean ratings were less for negative consequences, regardless of the intentions.)

In Figure 3, a comparison of a Piagetian story on stealing with one made for this experiment revealed greater effects of positive intention to the non-Piagetian story than to the Piagetian one. This was expected since the motives

used in the stories for this experiment were explicitly stated and less ambiguous than the ones used by Piaget. This analysis was made for only one of the stories, stealing, and not for lying, since during the course of the experiment, one of the stories using boys as characters, was accidentally deleted from the tape. A 2 (groups) X 2 (types of stories) X 4 (combinations of intention and consequence) analysis of variance for repeated measures indicated significant differences in types of stories $F(1,59)=57.7$, $p < .01$; larger ratings of positive intention for the non-Piagetian stories than for the Piagetian ones. In addition, a significant interaction between types of stories and combinations intention/consequence was obtained, $F(3,177)=39.2$, $p < .01$.

One contrasting difference in the judgments of the nursery school students to that of the high school students was the effects of consequences of behavior. For the older subjects, if the actor was portrayed in the stories with having positive intentions, the effects of consequences were negligible. However, with the nursery school subjects, if negative consequences occurred in the stories, and even though the actor behaved with positive intentions, the overall ratings of the goodness of the actors was reduced. These findings support those of Armsby (1971) who reported that children's moral judgments are, at least to some degree, dependent on the situation. In his experiments with older children (6 to 8), Armsby showed that the use of intention information in children's judgments decreased when the consequences of an act were severe. Armsby concluded that the young child has not fully incorporated the concept of intentionality, for if the consequences are extreme enough, the child will more likely judge the accidental act as naughtier than acts that produce less extreme consequences. Costanzo, Coie, Grument and Farnill (1973) propose another reason why young children give so much weight to consequence in making their

judgments. They believe that the young child's own behavior is judged by parents and adults in terms of consequences. Children may be punished for producing negative outcomes such as breaking a glass or spilling a drink regardless of their intentions. Although adults do not always fail to consider a child's intentions, they may get so upset over the loss or destruction of something, that they produce fear and avoidance in the child. This creates a situation in which the young child learns to weigh the consequence of an act more than the intentionality of the actor.

Additionally, as Karniol (1978) points out, parents tend to be more concerned with inhibiting undesirable behavior than with promoting commendable behavior, and are therefore more likely to punish than to reward. Since ill-intended acts are likely to lead to punishment and well-intentional acts are less likely to be rewarded, children will have greater experience with the social consequences of ill-intentional acts than with the social consequences of well-intentional acts.

Finally, the procedure used in this experiment to measure moral judgments (the dolls and the board) appeared to provide these very young children with a task they found interesting and easy to understand. It allowed the child to make relative instead of absolute judgments; a task that is best suited for children of this age (Bryant, 1974). Providing a framework to make judgments, the young child can use scales of measurements usually thought to complex and to difficult for them. By creating a task that is interesting and enjoyable, as in this experiment, a better understanding of the cognitive processes of young children may occur.

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Footnotes

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²Paper presented to the Southeastern Psychological Association, March 24-26, 1983 in Atlanta Georgia.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Mean ratings of goodness by nursery school (NS) and high school (HS) subjects of the actors in stories in which the motive of obedience and its consequences were presented.

Figure 2. Mean ratings of goodness by nursery school (NS) and high school (HS) subjects of the actors in stories in which the motive of irascibility and its consequence were presented.

Figure 3. Mean ratings of goodness by nursery school (NS) and high school (HS) subjects of Piagetian and non-Piagetian stories in which the motive of stealing and its consequence were presented.

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RATINGS





